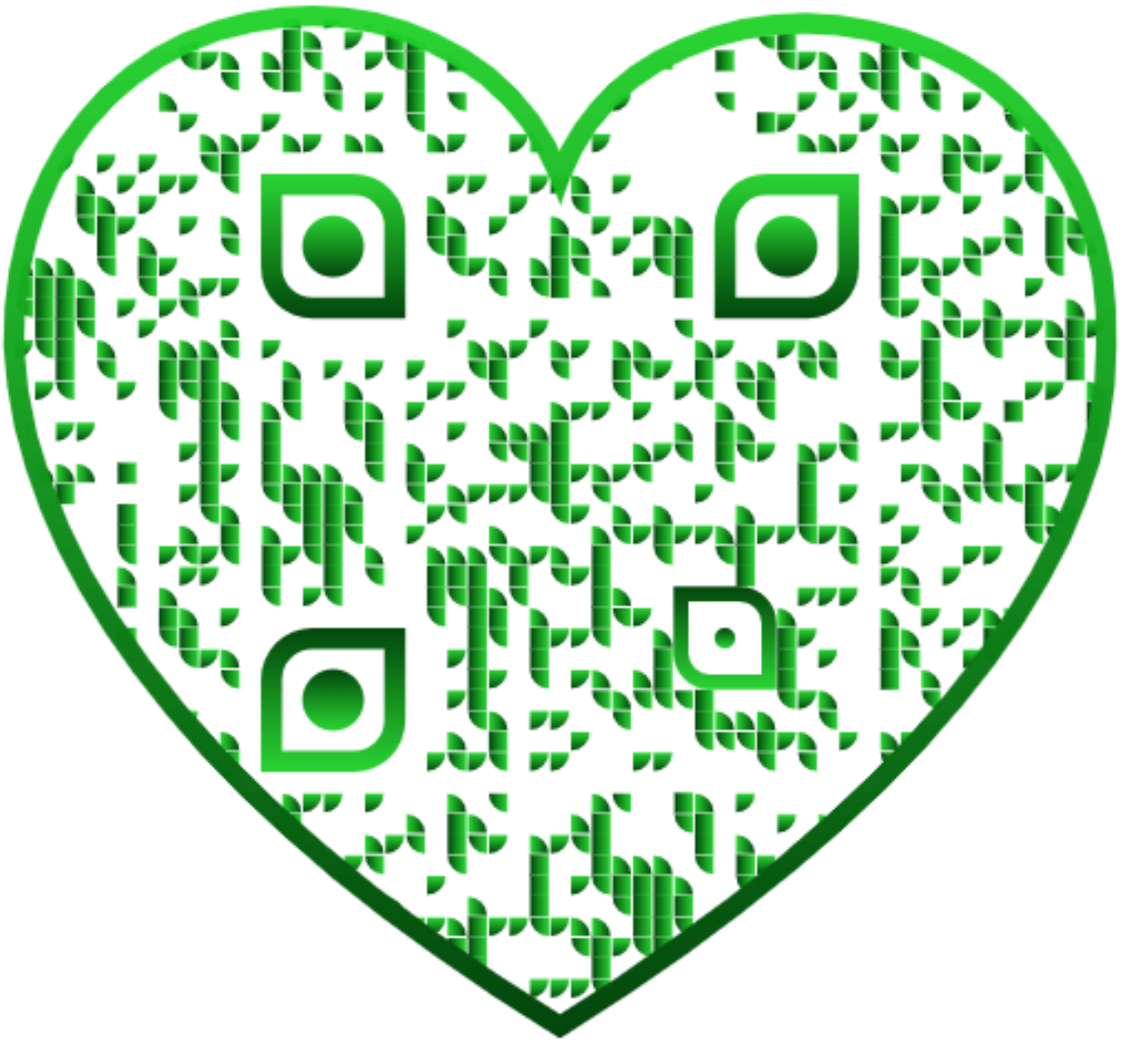
CHARLES RIVER EDITORS

OSIRIS

The History and Legacy of the Ancient Egyptian God of the Dead

MARKUS CARABAS



Osiris: The History and Legacy of the Ancient Egyptian God of the Dead

By Markus Carabas and Charles River Editors

Jeff Dahl's depiction of Osiris

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Introduction

A 6th century BCE bust of Osiris

Osiris

"Homage to thee, Osiris, Lord of eternity, King of the gods, whose names are manifold, whose transformations are sublime, whose form is hidden in the temples whose KA is holy, the Governor of Tetut, the mighty one of possessions in the shrine, the Lord whose praises are sung in the nome of

Anetch, President of the tchefa food in [Heliopolis], Lord who art commemorated in [the town of] Maati, the mysterious (or, hidden) Soul, the Lord of Qerret, the sublime one in White Wall [Memphis], the Soul of Ra [and] his very body, who hast thy dwelling in Henensu, the beneficent one, who art praised in Nart, who makest to rise up thy Soul, Lord of the Great House in the city of the Eight Gods, [who inspirest] great terror in Shas-hetep, Lord of eternity, Governor of Abtu (Abydos)."[1]

Africa may have given rise to the first human beings, and Egypt probably gave rise to the first great civilizations, which continue to fascinate modern societies across the globe nearly 5,000 years later. From the Library and Lighthouse of Alexandria to the Great Pyramid at Giza, the Ancient Egyptians produced several wonders of the world, revolutionized architecture and construction, created some of the world's first systems of mathematics and medicine, and established language and art that spread across the known world. With world-famous leaders like King Tut and Cleopatra, it's no wonder that today's world has so many Egyptologists.

What makes the accomplishments of the Ancient Egyptians all the more remarkable is that Egypt was historically a place of great political turbulence. Its position made it both valuable and vulnerable to tribes across the Mediterranean and the Middle East, and Ancient Egypt had no shortage of its own internecine warfare. Its most famous conquerors would come from Europe, with Alexander the Great laying the groundwork for the Hellenic Ptolemy line and the Romans extinguishing that line after defeating Cleopatra and driving her to suicide.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of ancient Egyptian civilization was its inception from the ground up, as the ancient Egyptians had no prior civilization which they could use as a template. In fact, ancient Egypt itself became a template for the civilizations that followed. The Greeks and the Romans were so impressed with Egyptian culture that they often attributed many attributes of their own culture–usually erroneously–to the Egyptians. With that said, some minor elements of ancient Egyptian culture were, indeed, passed on to later civilizations. Egyptian statuary appears to have had an initial influence on the Greek version, and the ancient Egyptian language continued long after the pharaonic period in the form of the Coptic language.

Although the Egyptians may not have passed their civilization directly on to later peoples, the key elements that comprised Egyptian civilization, including their religion, early ideas of state, and art and architecture, can be found among other civilizations. For instance, civilizations far separated in time and space, such as China and Mesoamerica, possessed key elements that were similar to those found in ancient Egypt. Indeed, since Egyptian civilization represented some fundamental human concepts, a study of their culture can be useful when trying to understand many other pre-modern cultures.

To the ancient Egyptians, as was the case with any society made up of inquiring humans, the world was a confusing and often terrifying place of destruction, death and unexplained phenomena. In order to make sense of such an existence, they resorted to teleological stories. Giving a phenomenon a story made it less horrifying, and it also helped them make sense of the world around them. Unsurprisingly, then, the ancient Egyptian gods permeated every aspect of existence.

Given the abundance of funerary artifacts that have been found within the sands of Egypt, it sometimes seems as though the Ancient Egyptians were more concerned with the matters of the afterlife than they were with matters of the life they experienced from day to day. This is underscored most prominently by the pyramids, which have captured the world’s imagination for centuries.

Thus, it’s little surprise that Osiris was one of the most important gods in the Egyptian pantheon, and he could well be the most famous of the Egyptian gods today. Aside from the ubiquity of the sun-god Re in much of modern popular culture, it is Osiris who captivates the minds of modern readers most. His story is both familiar and strangely alien. He is the god of the dead, but he became so by the very fact of his mortality. All the gods of ancient Egypt were capable of dying, but Osiris was also a symbol of resurrection, not unlike Christ in Christian theology. Osiris was betrayed by somebody close to him (in this case, his brother Seth) and was murdered and reborn, but here is where Osiris and Christ part ways. Osiris’s death is brutal, and his resurrection is the product of his wife Isis’s love for him.

Furthermore, Osiris was associated with the kings of Egypt because the

Egyptians believed he was a king himself. The ancient Egyptians could trace their kings back, one by one, to a time when the gods were believed to have ruled the land in person. Osiris was the third or fourth successor to the Egyptian throne after creation, and the Egyptians believed that Osiris's connection with kingship is what allowed their kings to be reborn in a way themselves. He was also said to be physically enormous – almost 15 and a half feet according to some sources – which was said to have aided him in his military campaigns.

Despite his grotesque appearance – it's likely that his green and black skin coloration was an early attempt at depicting putrefaction[2] – Osiris was the epitome of hope and renewal. His skin later came to represent the lush green of the crops around the Nile and the fertile black land they grew out of nearby. He was often shown as a mummified king sitting on a throne with the flail of a pharaoh and the crook of a shepherd, since he was the shepherd of people to the land of the dead, Duat. In fact, although Osiris was said to be capable of sending "demons" to the world of the living, he was generally considered to be a benevolent king of the underworld.

Depending on the phenomenon or feeling the ancient Egyptians experienced, there was a corresponding deity and a story to explain the connection. Acclaimed Egyptologist Garry Shaw described this ethos an "an endless repetition of creations, destructions and rebirths, entangled in a net of divine interactions … each person [living] as the hero of his own mythic narrative each day."[3] In this way, the ancient Egyptian would "assimilate" themselves with the corresponding deity that defined their situation at any given time. Shaw provided an excellent set of examples on this topic: "A person with a headache became Horus the Child, cared for by his mother, who herself became Isis; in death, the deceased transformed into various gods whilst traversing the afterlife realm, assuming each deity's divine authority for a time. Egypt's myths were elastic enough to be shaped into everyone's lives … myths, and the acts of the gods detailed therein, answered the question, 'why did this happen to me?' There is comfort in precedent."[4]

Osiris: The History and Legacy of the Ancient Egyptian God of the Dead looks at the mythology surrounding one of antiquity's most famous deities. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will

learn about Osiris like never before.

Osiris: The History and Legacy of the Ancient Egyptian God of the Dead
About Charles River Editors
Introduction
Note
The Origins of Ancient Egyptian Mythology
The Recording of The Myths
The Gods as Concepts
The Myths
The Resurrection Of Osiris
Duat
Conclusion
Online Resources
Bibliography
Free Books by Charles River Editors
Discounted Books by Charles River Editors

Note

The absolute dating of individual pharaohs has been a matter of long debate among Egyptologists, mostly due to the existence of several king lists that vary in the number of years they assign to each ruler.

The basic outline comes from Manetho, one of two priestly advisors to Ptolemy I (305-282 BCE). Manetho's *History* divides the pharaohs into 30 native dynasties and gives the number of years each ruler was on the throne, but no complete copy of Manetho's work exists.

Other king lists are also fragmentary. The Palermo Stone from Dynasty V (2498-2345 BCE) is a fairly complete list starting from the last Predynastic kings, but it sadly ends in the middle of Dynasty V. The Royal List of Karnak goes all the way to Tuthmosis III (1504-1450 BCE) and is especially useful in that it records many of the minor rulers of the Second Intermediate Period, when Egypt was divided into two or more states. The Royal List of Abydos skips these kings but runs all the way to the reign of Seti I (1291-1278 BCE). The Royal Canon of Turin is a badly damaged papyrus dating to around 1200 BCE that gives the precise length of reign of each ruler, often down to the day. Many portions of the list are missing, however.

Discoveries of other texts and radiocarbon dating have helped refine the dates, but there are still competing theories regarding the chronology, and all have both merits and problems. For the sake of consistency, this work uses the chronology set forth by Egyptologist Peter A. Clayton in his various works. The reader should note that while Clayton's chronology is a popular one, it is by no means universally accepted.

The Origins of Ancient Egyptian Mythology

Ancient Egypt spans a history of some 3,000 years, depending on how people want to divide it up. Many cultures, such as ancient Greece, divided their lengthy histories either according to cultural changes, such as the "Classical Era" beginning with the onset of democracy and ending with the death of Alexander the Great, or by following the reigns of each subsequent ruler. In ancient Egypt, the vast history was originally divided into dynasties.

Living in the 3rd century BCE, the Egyptian priest Manetho divided history into 30 dynasties, which later Egyptologists have grouped into longer periods according to how much of what is considered Egypt today fell under the rule of each king. They are given as follows, according to Shaw's chronology:[5]

The Pharaonic Period

Early Dynastic Period (Dynasties 1-2) ca.3050-2660 BCE

Old Kingdom (Dynasties 3-6) ca. 2660-2190 BCE

First Intermediate Period (Dynasties 7-11)ca. 2190-2066 BCE

Middle Kingdom (Dynasties 11-12) ca. 2066-1780 BCE

Second Intermediate Period (Dynasties 13-17) ca. 1780-1549 BCE

New Kingdom (Dynasties 18-20) ca. 1549-1069 BCE

Third Intermediate Period (21-25) ca. 1069-664 BCE

Late Period (Dynasties 26-31) ca. 664-332 BCE

The Ptolemaic Period 332-30 BCE

The Roman Period 30 BCE – 395 CE

In order to understand why modern scholars chose to divide history into longer periods of dynastic rule, it is necessary to understand the geography of Egypt's ruled dominions. The river that defined and dictated much of ancient people's lives and ideologies, the Nile, runs from south to north, with a sprawling delta in the north and more barren land to the south. This distinction is the reason for one of the most confusing aspects of Egyptian history, as the "Upper Kingdom" was in the south and the "Lower Kingdom" was in the north.[6] These "Two Lands" were represented by two distinct crowns – the "Red Crown" for the Lower Kingdom and the "White Crown" for the "Upper Kingdom" – each worn by their distinct rulers and worn as a "Double Crown" when both kingdoms were unified. It was during the "intermediate" periods that the country was divided into the two kingdoms, and these periods were often marked by political turmoil and a distinct drop in cultural production, such as art and architecture.

From as early as the Early Dynastic Period, the country was divided into smaller dominions along the river that modern scholars call “Nomes”. The word “nome” comes from the ancient Greeks who, during the rule of the Greek Ptolemaic dynasty (332-30 BCE) in Egypt, referred to each as a kind of “pasturage” coming under the overarching rule of the Pharaoh of that kingdom. This made for a useful way of organising the inhabitants of the two kingdoms, but it causes problems when trying to define what version of a common myth is the “correct” or “most widely believed”. The reason for this is that the myths, though they had some similarities, could diverge widely from nome to nome. That is why writers such as the ancient historian Plutarch chose to single out a particular version of a myth and record or study it alone.

Later scholars further subdivided these various types of myth according to the cult center that either produced or “standardized” them.[7] They refer to them as “theologies,” such as the “Memphite Theology” (myths from Memphis) or the “Heliopolitan Theology” (myths from Heliopolis). There is the theory that these “theologies” were competing in some way with others from different cult centers. Shaw, however, takes the view that they were more alternatives than opposing theories and although each cult center would substitute a god from another nome for one of their own local deities, there wasn’t really any kind of animosity between the differing believers. Despite the fact that there was no externally enforced dogma over the whole of Egypt, the Egyptians still managed to maintain some overarching concepts. One such concept is that of the creation of the universe. Generally speaking, there was a limitless dark ocean of “chaos” called Nun, out of which a god was born who instigated creation.[8] The different cult centers felt at liberty to amend or augment that concept to incorporate local tastes and allegiances to deities. Later on, during the period of the New Kingdom, the cult center of Thebes gained prominence and the priests there tried to unify the earlier traditions of Egypt. In this attempt, Amun was the creator god but the Thebans also incorporated the traditions of the major cult centers like Hermopolis, Memphis and Heliopolis, which often seem quite disparate accounts to the modern reader but were quite ingeniously brought together at Thebes around 1200 BCE.[9]

The general creation story contains within it two aspects that are crucial to

understanding all of the myths of ancient Egypt: *maat* and *isfet*. Isfet represents chaos or disorder, generally speaking, and it was seen as a fundamental element of everything in existence. There was no notion of trying to eradicate isfet from their general lives in ancient Egypt; after all, it was said to be one of the elements that was present in the limitless ocean at the dawn of creation. The only desire for ancient Egyptians was that isfet never became more prevalent than maat, its opposite: justice. Maat was often depicted as a goddess wearing a feather on her head, which was also the hieroglyph that represented her.[10] She, or simply the concept of justice, was believed to be present in all aspects of life and if it was broken by anyone, there would be a punishment. According to the Middle Kingdom "Coffin Text" it was believed that Atum, the "Great Finisher" of creation,[11] inhaled maat in order to gain his consciousness: "Inhale your daughter Maat [said Nun to Atum] and raise her to your nostril so that your consciousness may live. May they not be far from you, your daughter Maat and your son Shu, whose name is "life" … it is your son Shu who will lift you up."[12]

After that, Atum was capable of making the waters of Nun recede away from him, making him rise above them and become "what remained" or the "mound of creation." It's important to take note of the fact that there was no creation until Atum inhaled life and justice. Therefore without maat and her dualistic counterpart, there would have been no world, and that is the reason for maat and isfet's ubiquity, as well as the acceptance of chaos in the world as seen by the ancient Egyptians. After Atum had separated himself from Nun, the children he kept inside, notably Shu and maat/isfet, often represented as a form of the goddess Tefnut, were now separated from their father, and Tefnut would go on to become the mother of all the gods.

The Recording of The Myths

Since each of the nomes had their own version of a given myth, collecting Egyptian myths into a definitive text was never possible. This has further exacerbated the mythologist's job, since these stories have survived in disparate versions and media.

The myths may have arrived at the hands of scholars from inscriptions on pyramid walls (such as the Old Kingdom's "Pyramid Texts"), painted on the inside of coffins (such as the Middle Kingdom's "Coffin Texts"), or texts

written on papyri (such as the famous “Book of the Dead,” which dates back to the Second Intermediate Period).[13] The mythologist’s job is made even more exacting by the fact that, since the scribes who documented the myths assumed their readers were knowledgeable about the stories’ details, they opted to refer to myths obliquely out of a sense of decorum. This was often the case for Osiris, whose death was a troublesome topic for those inscribing on the funerary monuments since it was thought that simply mentioning his death could “magically harm the deceased.”[14]

Scenes from the Book of the Dead

The vast history of Egypt makes tracking the development of certain myths a complex process. In terms of the oldest description of death, modern scholars have the Pyramid Texts. These were initially inscribed on the walls of the 5th Dynasty pyramid of Unas at Saqqara,[15] and they documented and gave advice to the king on his journey into the afterlife. These inscriptions were later copied onto other pyramids from the Old Kingdom and have therefore survived in good condition.

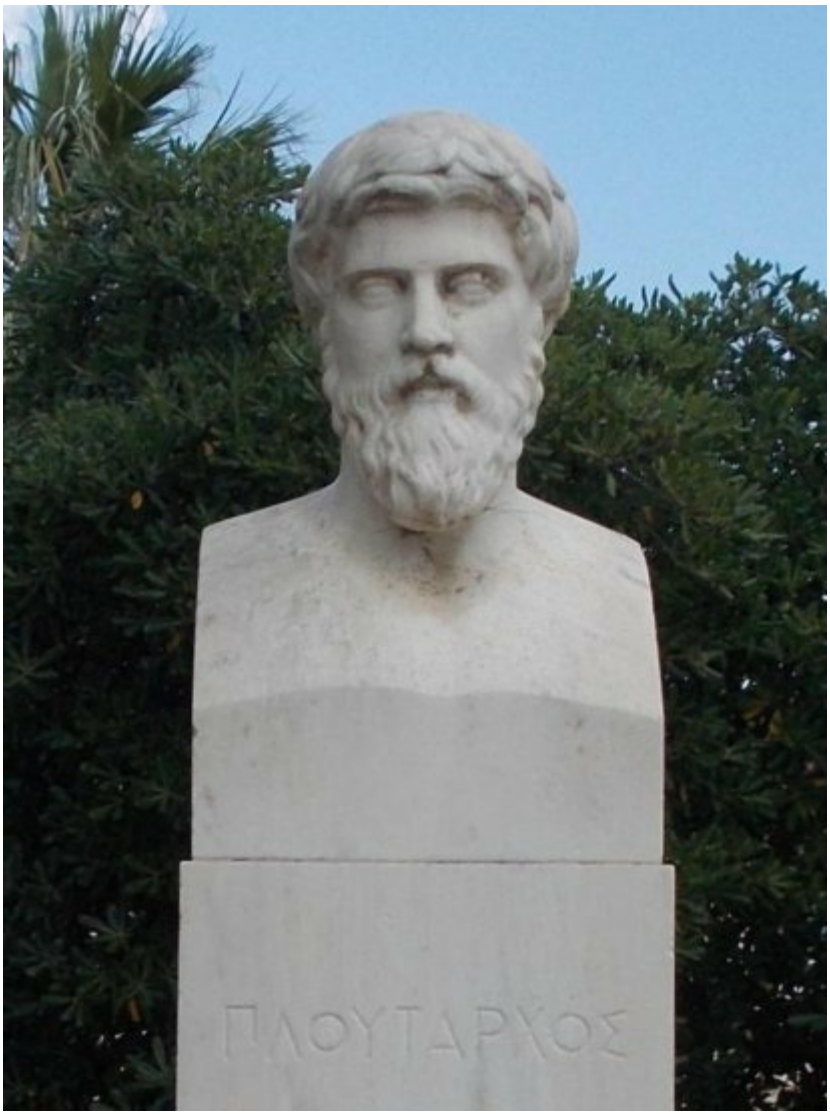
Unas Pyramid Text

Possibly the next most influential source came from the Roman era. Plutarch was a Greek historian and priest who lived in the late 1st and early 2nd century CE. He traveled to Egypt, it seems, but once he arrived there he was incapable of reading any hieroglyphs, so he largely depended on conversations with the locals and also a smattering of earlier literature that speculated on the identity of Egyptian gods and compared them with the Greeks' own pantheon. For instance, to the ancient Greeks the god Amun was Zeus, and the same applied to Hermes and Thoth, Apollo and Horus, and

Dionysus and Osiris. The connection between Greece and Egypt was an ancient one and continues to have an influence on modern readers since many of the cult centers of ancient Egypt are referred to by their ancient Greek names, such as Hermopolis the City of Hermes, rather than their ancient Egyptian names, most likely because of the troublesome nature of transliterating Egyptian words. Nevertheless, Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris* is the fullest account of the key myth in Egyptian mythology and is the best-known version for modern scholarship too.[16]

Despite the fact that Plutarch's account is late in terms of the wider history of Egyptian mythology, it is a surprisingly accurate take on the formation of the myth of Isis and Osiris, dating back to around 600 years before his arrival.[17] Of course, this does not make it an accurate account of the much earlier story of Osiris, but since describing his death and dismemberment was not a taboo for a Greek, his later account did not suffer from the obliqueness of the early sources.

Moreover, although Plutarch was not an Egyptian, he was an excellent scholar of foreign mythology. For him, the reason for writing down the myth of Isis and Osiris was to try and find a "fundamental truth" to the myths of both his own culture (of which he was a priest at Delphi for the remaining 30 years of his life) and that of his neighboring culture, which all Greeks considered to be much more ancient than their own. It was his scholarly approach and earnest desire to record the "truth" that makes his already interesting story worthy of study as a genuine account of the myth of Isis and Osiris.



A bust of Plutarch

The Gods as Concepts

Like in many polytheistic religious beliefs, the gods of ancient Egypt were neither omnipotent nor omnipresent, despite appearing in many locations simultaneously in some of the myths.[18] In fact, the ancient Egyptians used to worship the deity of the location they found themselves in, since each deity was more or less “present” in each part of the country. They were decidedly human in their relationships with each other. Just like the ancient Greek gods, they fought and argued, made love and married, and were ultimately capable of death, even if this meant that they would simply be reborn later on. Each god and goddess was “responsible” for an aspect of reality the ancient

Egyptians encountered every day but, when they needed to, they could share their powers with another deity, which resulted in a kind of *merging* of the two. This was the case for the "dying sun god" who merged with Osiris so as to borrow his regenerative power and be "reborn" the following day.[19]

In the Memphite theology, the universe is created by the god Ptah, who "conceived the elements of creation in his heart and pronounced them into existence with the divine words as he pronounced their names." Yet some scholars believe that Ptah was only capable of such creation after he borrowed the heart and tongue from Amun, the ultimate creator; as such it was Ptah's being the personification of "creative process" that directed and guided Amun's creative abilities.[20]

When the deities merged or even appeared to take on the attributes of another god or goddess they were said to "literally become" the other deity. Shaw gives the example of Hathor attacking mankind with such a rage that she actually transformed into the bloodthirsty goddess Sekhmet. It might be best to think of the deities of ancient Egypt as manifestations rather than distinct personalities with concrete biographies. As such they helped the ancient Egyptians describe the world around them and, by giving precedents in their myths, explain away the more confusing aspects of why the world is the way it is.[21]

In ancient Egyptian culture the duality of deities – most often manifested in their male/female relationships – was an integral aspect of the belief system. This duality appeared in Nun, the limitless ocean of potentiality out of which the universe was born. Within those waters, the male and female aspects appeared as frogs (males) and snakes (females). There were four couples, according to the beliefs at Hermopolis, making up the eight most important gods of "pre-creation" referred to at this cult center as the "Ogdoad". Each of these gods and goddesses acquired names and, as a unit, they represented the earliest aspects of reality. Nun and Naunet represented the "limitless waters" out of which everything was created; Huh and Hauhet represented the concept of "infinity"; Kuk and Kauket represented "darkness," and Amun and Amunet represented the concept of "hiddenness".[22] Later assessments of the Ogdoad, certainly by the time of the Theban attempt at "unification," emphasize the role of Amun in the creation of the first island and

subsequently of the egg from which the sun god is hatched.

Atum's children, Shu and Tefnut, were also both siblings and a couple at the same time but their separation from their father led to the separation between an "above" and "below" by Shu, which created all of the space in which life could appear and grow. Also, Shu represented *neheh*, which was the Egyptian concept of cyclical time, whereas his wife came to represent *djet*, which was the concept of "time at a standstill, covering everything that is remaining and lasting, such as mummies or stone architecture," according to Gary Shaw.[23]

In the coupling of the gods, Osiris and Isis were one of the earliest to have established their incestuous relationship with an apparent "wooing in the womb." Isis's role as a wife and mother is unlike any other in Egyptian mythology. The story of Osiris's death and resurrection is best read with Isis's agency in mind too. She is not an idle mourner of her husband, nor is she the mere receptacle of a divine birth. She actively seeks out Osiris's body, performing a magical ritual to acquire from the body enough of Osiris's "seed" to conceive, and she even goes so far as to poison Re in order to learn his secret names and pass on their power to her child. Similar to Osiris, Isis is an instigator as much as a carer. If Osiris ensures the regeneration and rebirth of the sun, the dead and the crops beside the Nile, then none of those accomplishments would have been brought to fruition without Isis's unwavering perseverance to resurrect her husband. She is no ordinary "Queen" in the medieval European sense, she was proactive and, as such, defined Osiris as much as he defined her.

Now that the basics of Egyptian beliefs have been presented, the myths will hopefully become a little clearer, or at very least more contextualised. The ability to use original texts is a luxury that is available to modern readers thanks to the passionate and untiring work of translators and scholars around the world, an enormous job that still has vast veins of knowledge to uncover, and should not be forgotten when enjoying even the most cursory study of this beautiful mythology.

A statue of Osiris wearing an Atef-crown made of bronze

Statuettes of Osiris (middle) alongside Horus (left) and Isis (right)

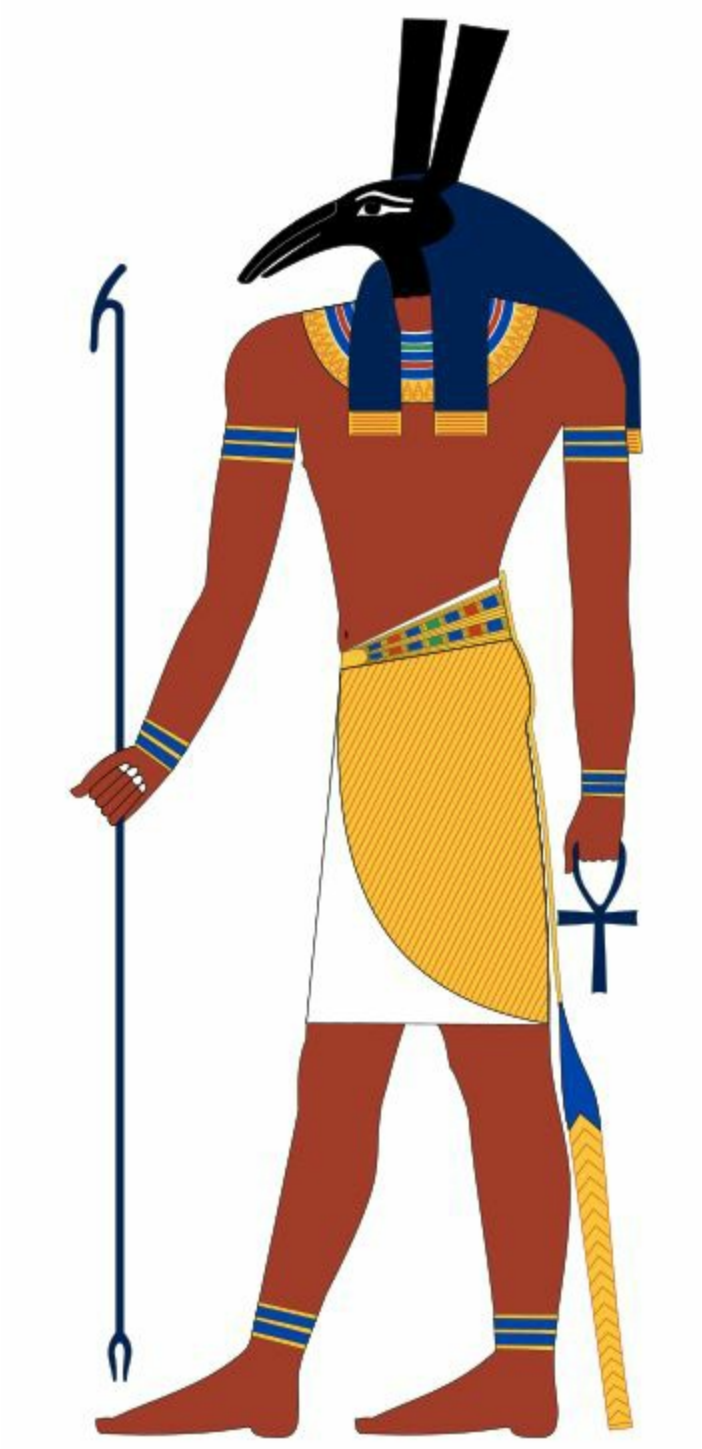
The Myths

After Shu and Tefnut were separated from their father, they also gave birth to a pair of deities called Nut and Geb. Nut was the sky goddess, often depicted as a naked lady with her hands and feet touching the earth and her body representing the heavens. Geb was the male god of the earth, usually

represented as a reclining man with green skin with foliage on it. There is a story told in Plutarch's *Moralia* that equates the Egyptian gods with those of the ancient Greeks, something Plutarch was prone to do. The story talks about how Nut and Geb (whom Plutarch equates with the Greek deities Rhea and Cronus) can't make love because Shu kept them separated. When they tried to meet in secret, however, they incurred the wrath of the sun or "Re". "They say that the Sun, when he became aware of Rhea's intercourse with Cronus, invoked a curse upon her that she should not give birth to a child in any month or year; but Hermes [Thoth], being enamoured of the [Moon], consorted with her. Later, playing at draughts with the moon, he won from her the seventieth part of each of her periods of illumination, and from all the winnings he composed five days, and intercalated them as an addition to the ['original'] three hundred and sixty days. The Egyptians even now call these five days intercalated and celebrate them as the birthdays of the gods. They relate that on the first of these days Osiris was born, and at the hour of his birth a voice issued forth saying, 'The Lord of All advances to the light.' But some relate that a certain Pamyles, while he was drawing water in Thebes, heard a voice issuing from the shrine of Zeus, which bade him proclaim with a loud voice that a mighty and beneficent king, Osiris, had been born; and for this Cronus entrusted to him the child Osiris, which he brought up. It is in his honour that the festival of Pamylia is celebrated, a festival which resembles the phallic processions. On the second of these days Arueris was born whom they call Apollo, and some call him also the elder Horus. On the third day Typhon [Seth] was born, but not in due season or manner, but with a blow he broke through his mother's side and leapt forth. On the fourth day Isis was born in the regions that are ever moist; and on the fifth Nephthys, to whom they give the name of Finality and the name of Aphroditê, and some also the name of Victory. There is also a tradition that Osiris and Arueris were sprung from the Sun, Isis from Hermes, and [Seth] and Nephthys from Cronus. For this reason the kings considered the third of the intercalated days as inauspicious, and transacted no business on that day, nor did they give any attention to their bodies until nightfall. They relate, moreover, that Nephthys became the wife of [Seth]; but Isis and Osiris were enamoured of each other and consorted together in the darkness of the womb before their birth. Some say that Arueris came from this union and was called the elder Horus by the Egyptians, but Apollo by the Greeks."[24]

Since many non-Greek sources do not include the birth of Horus the Elder in their lists, counting all of the children from Amun (Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris Seth, Isis, and Nephthys) makes up what is known as the Great Ennead, the group of nine deities who “represented the physical creation of the world.”[25] That Amun was the progenitor of the Ennead does not go far enough towards defining the power he maintained after their birth. It’s important to remember that Amun created Atum and then they became one deity that subsequently birthed all of existence, including the Ennead. For this reason, the ancient Egyptians saw Amun in all things, especially the gods and goddesses of the Ennead, who were understood to be forces called Netjeru (the “gods”) that interacted independently but were always a part of Amun the creator.

Seth was essentially a god of disorder, and although he was associated with confusion, violence and even “evil,”[26] it was in this god’s nature to question and disrupt the status quo, to try and upset the balance of maat and isfet. In the art of ancient Egypt, Seth often appears as a strange animal with an elongated snout, tall rectangular ears and an erect tail;[27] but also as a human with the same animal’s head, a red ox, a desert oryx or even a pig or hippopotamus. In fact, so strange is this animal that most commonly represents Seth that modern scholars have been unable to ascertain what the ancient scribes wanted to depict as Seth’s animal; it has subsequently been referred to as the “Seth (or “Set”) Animal”.



Jeff Dahl’s depiction of Seth

An ancient depiction of Horus spearing Seth, who's in the form of a hippopotamus, while Isis looks on

Seth was also the god of the "Red Land," or the desert, which contrasted him with Osiris's son Horus, who was the god of the "Black Land," the

fertile soil in the Nile floodplains. This contrast is fairly common in Seth's character. He had a cult base at Ombos, in Egypt, but he was also said to represent foreigners. Whereas most gods had bones of silver,[28] Seth's were of iron, connecting him with metallurgy in general but, more importantly, with the bellicose metal used later in warfare.

Re gave Osiris the crown of Egypt and invested him with his power in the Heliopolitan nome. However, given Re was the god of the sun and Osiris was not, the new king quickly succumbed to the sheer heat of the sun-god"s crown and began his reign with a wilted expression and a swollen face.[29] He did not die from exposure to the sun-god's crown, however, and so he eventually came to be associated with Re and, later, the Greeks too. As Diodorus Siculus made clear: "Now the men of Egypt, he says, when ages ago they came into existence, as they looked up at the firmament and were struck with both awe and wonder at the nature of the universe, conceived that two gods were both eternal and first, namely, the sun and the moon, whom they called respectively Osiris and Isis, these appellations having in each case been based upon a certain meaning in them. For when the names are translated into Greek Osiris means 'many-eyed,' and properly so; for in shedding his rays in every direction he surveys with many eyes, as it were, all land and sea."[30]

Osiris was said to have two generals, one in the south (Upper Egypt), called Hu, who was the personification of authority itself, and one in Lower Egypt called Sia, meaning "perception."[31]This is an important antecedent of the Egyptian royal power structure. As seen above, the country's history can be written as a history of division versus unity. Having Osiris unify the country with two generals whose name carried such political and military weight was surely not accidental. Osiris's rule was the epitome of kingship and the Egyptians never forgot it.

Osiris grew into a fine and just king, greatly respected by his subjects. In fact, his reign took on the memory of a kind of golden age for the ancient Egyptians. Humans and gods respected Osiris and that led to the constant presence of food and cool winds from the north which tempered the ferocity of the desert. Associating a golden age – whether in the past or the future – with a beloved god or goddess is a common occurrence in all world religions

and, in Egypt, Osiris was most beloved of all. This was perhaps because of his love of all the things that give humanity joy, art and wine especially. This association with wine is what convinced many of the ancient Greeks to associate him with their own god of celebration: “And of the ancient Greek writers of mythology some give to Osiris the name Dionysus or, with a slight change in form, Sirius. One of them, Eumolpus, in his Bacchic Hymn speaks of ‘Our Dionysus, shining like a star with fiery eye in ev’ry ray.’ While Orpheus says ‘And this is why men call him ‘Shining one.’ Some say that Osiris is also represented with the cloak of fawn-skin about his shoulders as imitating the sky spangled with the stars.”[32]

Diodorus Siculus paints Osiris as a “Culture Hero” of sorts. These “culture heroes” were the deities (or even sometimes humans or spirits, as was the case in Native American culture) that instigated certain cultural norms later on. Osiris’s having two generals – one in the north and one in the south – was one such cultural “change” caused by Osiris but Diodorus takes the step further to include cannibalism: “[A]nd after Osiris married Isis and succeeded to the kingship he did many things of service to the social life of man. Osiris was the first, they record, to make mankind give up cannibalism; for after Isis had discovered the fruit of both wheat and barley which grew wild over the land along with the other plants but was still unknown to man, and Osiris had also devised the cultivation of these fruits, all men were glad to change their food, both because of the pleasing nature of the newly-discovered grains and because it seemed to their advantage to refrain from their butchery of one another. As proof of the discovery of these fruits they offer the following ancient custom which they still observe: Even yet at harvest time the people make a dedication of the first heads of the grain to be cut, and standing beside the sheaf beat themselves and call upon Isis, by this act rendering honour to the goddess for the fruits which she discovered, at the season when she first did this.”[33]

Both Osiris and Isis were believed to favor those who nurtured the arts and those who made technological advances as well, according to Diodorus Siculus. This made an argument for the very early technological advancement of the ancient Egyptians, since their first real king after the direct rule of the earth god Geb was a patron of the arts and advancement. “Special esteem at the court of Osiris and Isis was also accorded to those who should invent any

of the arts or devise any useful process; consequently, since copper and gold mines had been discovered in the Thebaid, they fashioned implements with which they killed the wild beasts and worked the soil, and thus in eager rivalry brought the country under cultivation, and they made images of the gods and magnificent golden chapels for their worship."[34]

This desire to see the promulgation of the arts and technology was part of Osiris's general personality. As a god related to the complex agricultural system the ancient Egyptians invented, Osiris would no doubt have loved and respected knowledge in all its forms from the early days of his worship. It is most likely for this reason that Thoth was his "most highly honoured" advisor, according to Diodorus Siculus. "The one most highly honoured by him was Hermes [Thoth], who was endowed with unusual ingenuity for devising things capable of improving the social life of man. It was by Hermes, for instance, according to them, that the common language of mankind was first further articulated, and that many objects which were still nameless received an appellation, that the alphabet was invented, and that ordinances regarding the honours and offerings due to the gods were duly established; he was the first also to observe the orderly arrangement of the stars and the harmony of the musical sounds and their nature, to establish a wrestling school, and to give thought to the rhythmical movement of the human body and its proper development. He also made a lyre and gave it three strings, imitating the seasons of the year; for he adopted three tones, a high, a low, and a medium; the high from the summer, the low from the winter, and the medium from the spring. The Greeks also were taught by him how to expound (hermeneia) their thoughts, and it was for this reason that he was given the name Hermes. In a word, Osiris, taking him for his priestly scribe, communicated with him on every matter and used his counsel above that of all others. The olive tree also, they claim, was his discovery, not Athena"s, as the Greeks say."[35]

There was a long-standing tradition of people from one culture visiting another and equating the foreign gods to versions of the gods they already worshipped based on their physical or mythological attributes. The Romans did so with the Greeks and the early Germanic tribes, resulting in the Roman Mars being equated with the Greek Ares and the Germanic Tyr very early on. The Greeks also practiced this in their interactions with their neighbours. The

Phoenician god Melqart was called “Herakles of Tyre” because of the similarities in their myths.

It might seem difficult at first to understand why the putrefying god of Egypt could be compared with the joyous god Dionysus. However, in the Cretan version of Dionysus’s myths, he is not only the son of the Persephone, but he is also once devoured by the Titans (all except the heart, which was the only organ left inside the mummified bodies dedicated to Osiris). As Diodorus Siculus relates, Osiris’s connection with this rebirth in agricultural terms is one aspect the two gods share: “Osiris, they say, was also interested in agriculture and was reared in Nysa, a city of Arabia Felix near Egypt, being a son of Zeus; and the name which he bears among the Greeks is derived both from his father and from the birthplace, since he is called Dionysus. And the discovery of the vine, they say, was made by him near Nysa, and that, having further devised the proper treatment of its fruit, he was the first to drink wine and taught mankind at large the culture of the vine and the use of wine, as well as the way to harvest the grape and to store wine. “[36]

Osiris was also said to have gone on an almost Bacchic adventure before becoming the king of Upper and Lower Egypt. This mimics Dionysus” youthful “wanderings” in which he taught the people of the world about agriculture and, especially, the “fruit of the vine,” while at the same time imposing some kind of benevolent conquest upon them. “Of Osiris they say that, being of a beneficent turn of mind, and eager for glory, he gathered together a great army, with the intention of visiting all the inhabited earth and teaching the race of men how to cultivate the vine and sow wheat and barley; for he supposed that if he made men give up their savagery and adopt a gentle manner of life he would receive immortal honours because of the magnitude of his benefactions. And this did in fact take place, since not only the men of his time who received his gift, but all succeeding generations as well, because of the delight which they take in the foods which were discovered, have honoured those who introduced them as gods most illustrious. Now after Osiris had established the affairs of Egypt and turned the supreme power over to Isis his wife, they say that he placed Hermes at her side as counsellor because his prudence raised him above the king”s other friends, and as general of all the land under his sway he left Heracles, who was both his kinsman and renowned for his valour and physical strength … then

he himself left Egypt with his army to make his campaign, taking in his company also his brother, whom the Greeks call Apollo. And it was Apollo, they say, who discovered the laurel, a garland of which all men place about the head of this god above all others. The discovery of ivy is also attributed to Osiris by the Egyptians and made sacred to this god, just as the Greeks also do in the case of Dionysus. And in the Egyptian language, they say, the ivy is called the plant of Osiris's and for purposes of dedication is preferred to the vine, since the latter sheds its leaves while the former ever remains green; the same rule, moreover, the ancients have followed in the case of other plants also which are perennially green, ascribing, for instance, the myrtle to Aphrodite and the laurel to Apollo."[37]

After this episode, Osiris meets with Dionysus's favourite mythological beings, the satyrs and muses. Before returning home to Egypt with a plethora of gifts, Osiris spends his time merrymaking in full Dionysian style and giving technology and power to foreign peoples so that they would eventually pay tribute to him later. As Plutarch put it, "One of the first acts related of Osiris in his reign was to deliver the Egyptians from their destitute and brutish manner of living. This he did by showing them the fruits of cultivation, by giving them laws, and by teaching them to honour the gods. Later he travelled over the whole earth civilizing it without the slightest need of arms, but most of the peoples he won over to his way by the charm of his persuasive discourse combined with song and all manner of music. Hence the Greeks came to identify him with Dionysus."[38]

Similar to Dionysus, then, Osiris was originally a flamboyant merrymaker with a desire to encourage and also disseminate knowledge and technology around the world. He was the instigator of great things for humanity and the gods, and that power did not leave him even after death.

Since the Egyptians considered the subject of Osiris's death taboo to a certain extent, there are very few surviving texts predating the Roman era that describe the subject at length. It is for that reason that most scholars refer to the later accounts of Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch.[39] Furthermore, from what remains of the earlier texts, it seems that the story changed over the centuries, as some versions even have him drowning in the Nile and then floating north as he does in the later versions.

All accounts include the trickery of Seth and the brutality of Osiris's murder. "During his absence the tradition is that Typhon [Seth] attempted nothing revolutionary because Isis, who was in control, was vigilant and alert; but when [Osiris] returned home [Seth] contrived a treacherous plot against him and formed a group of conspirators seventy-two in number. He had also the co-operation of a queen from Ethiopia who was there at the time and whose name they report as Aso. [Seth], having secretly measured Osiris's body and having made ready a beautiful chest of corresponding size artistically ornamented, caused it to be brought into the room where the festivity was in progress. The company was much pleased at the sight of it and admired it greatly, whereupon [Seth] jestingly promised to present it to the man who should find the chest to be exactly his length when he lay down in it. They all tried it in turn, but no one fitted it; then Osiris got into it and lay down, and those who were in the plot ran to it and slammed down the lid, which they fastened by nails from the outside and also by using molten lead. Then they carried the chest to the river and sent it on its way to the sea through the Tanitic Mouth. Wherefore the Egyptians even to this day name this mouth the hateful and execrable. Such is the tradition … The first to learn of the deed and to bring to men's knowledge an account of what had been done were the Pans and Satyrs who lived in the region around Chemmis, and so, even to this day, the sudden confusion and consternation of a crowd is called a panic. Isis, when the tidings reached her, at once cut off one of her tresses and put on a garment of mourning in a place where the city still bears the name of Kopto. Others think that the name means deprivation, for they also express 'deprive' by means of 'koptein.' But Isis wandered everywhere at her wits' end; no one whom she approached did she fail to address, and even when she met some little children she asked them about the chest. As it happened, they had seen it, and they told her the mouth of the river through which the friends of [Seth] had launched the coffin into the sea. Wherefore the Egyptians think that little children possess the power of prophecy, and they try to divine the future from the portents which they find in children's words, especially when children are playing about in holy places and crying out whatever chances to come into their minds.

Osiris's connection with Anubis is very much taken for granted in many of the texts concerning death and burial. Anubis was the embalming god who

prepared the dead for their journey, and he was even there at the very end of their mortality, when their hearts were judged against the feather of maat in front of Osiris himself. However, this connection was solidified not by Osiris's adultery, but by Isis's perseverance in resurrecting her husband:

> "[The Egyptians] relate also that Isis, learning that Osiris in his love had consorted with her sister [Nephthys] through ignorance, in the belief that she was Isis, and seeing the proof of this in the garland of melilote which he had left with Nephthys, sought to find the child; for the mother, immediately after its birth, had exposed it because of her fear of [Seth]. And when the child had been found, after great toil and trouble, with the help of dogs, which led Isis to it, it was brought up and became her guardian and attendant, receiving the name of Anubis, and it is said to protect the gods just as dogs protect men.
>
> "Thereafter Isis, as they relate, learned that the chest had been cast up by the sea near the land of Byblos and that the waves had gently set it down in the midst of a clump of heather. The heather in a short time ran up into a very beautiful and massive stock, and enfolded and embraced the chest with its growth and concealed it within its trunk. The king of the country admired the great size of the plant, and cut off the portion that enfolded the chest (which was now hidden from sight), and used it as a pillar to support the roof of his house. These facts, they say, Isis ascertained by the divine inspiration of "rumour," and so she came to Byblos and sat down by a spring, all dejection and tears; she exchanged no word with anybody, save only that she welcomed the queen's maidservants and treated them with great amiability, plaiting their hair for them and imparting to their persons a wondrous fragrance from her own body. But when the queen observed her maidservants, a longing came upon her for the unknown woman and for such hairdressing and for a body fragrant with ambrosia. Thus it happened that Isis was sent for and became so intimate with the queen that the queen made her the nurse of her baby …
>
> "They relate that Isis nursed the child by giving it her finger to

suck instead of her breast, and in the night she would burn away the mortal portions of its body. She herself would turn into a swallow and flit about the pillar with a wailing lament, until the queen who had been watching, when she saw her babe on fire, gave forth a loud cry and thus deprived it of immortality. Then the goddess disclosed herself and asked for the pillar, which served to support the roof. She removed it with the greatest ease and cut away the wood of the heather which surrounded the chest; then, when she had wrapped up the wood in a linen cloth and had poured perfume upon it, she entrusted it to the care of the kings; and even to this day the people of Byblos venerate this wood which is preserved in the shrine of Isis. Then the goddess threw herself down upon the coffin with such a dreadful wailing that the younger of the king's sons expired on the spot. The elder son she kept with her, and, having placed the coffin on board a boat, she put out from land. Since the Phaedrus river toward the early morning fostered a rather boisterous wind, the goddess grew angry and dried up its stream."[40]

A depiction of Osiris, Anubis, and Horus in the tomb of Horemheb

The “wandering” aspect of Isis’s myth here strongly resembles the story of another Mediterranean goddess who wandered in lament over a loved one she lost to death: Demeter. The Greek version of the story is extremely similar to that of Isis, except Demeter laments the kidnapping of her daughter Persephone at the hands of the god of the underworld, Hades. Demeter even enters the house of a royal family to become nurse to a child that she would later place in the fire to magically burn away the “weaknesses” inherent in humans.

The flow of influences between certain Greek and Egyptian myths is unquestioned. An agreement is reached in the Greek myth, however, to allow Persephone to leave the underworld for part of the year in order to bring fertility back to the earth for at least that amount of time. In the Egyptian

version, Isis has to use her magic to gain some part of her husband back, and in the following passage, it is clear that the goddess goes through a desperate ordeal to do so:

> "In the first place where she found seclusion, when she was quite by herself, they relate that she opened the chest and laid her face upon the face within and caressed it and wept. The child came quietly up behind her and saw what was there, and when the goddess became aware of his presence, she turned about and gave him one awful look of anger. The [King's eldest] child could not endure the fright, and died … He also is the recipient of honours because of the goddess; for they say that the Maneros of whom the Egyptians sing at their convivial gatherings is this very child … They also recount that this Maneros who is the theme of their songs was the first to invent music. But some say that the word is not the name of any person, but an expression belonging to the vocabulary of drinking and feasting: 'Good luck be ours in things like this!' and that this is really the idea expressed by the exclamation 'maneros' whenever the Egyptians use it. In the same way we may be sure that the likeness of a corpse which, as it is exhibited to them, is carried around in a chest, is not a reminder of what happened to Osiris, as some assume; but it is to urge them, as they contemplate it, to use and to enjoy the present, since all very soon must be what it is now and this is their purpose in introducing it into the midst of merry-making.
>
> "As they relate, Isis proceeded to her son Horus, who was being reared in Buto, and bestowed the chest in a place well out of the way; but [Seth], who was hunting by night in the light of the moon, happened upon it. Recognizing the body he divided it into fourteen parts and scattered them, each in a different place. Isis learned of this and sought for them again, sailing through the swamps in a boat of papyrus. This is the reason why people sailing in such boats are not harmed by the crocodiles, since these creatures in their own way show either their fear or their reverence for the goddess.

> “The traditional result of Osiris’s dismemberment is that there are many so-called tombs of Osiris in Egypt; for Isis held a funeral for each part when she had found it. Others deny this and assert that she caused effigies of him to be made and these she distributed among the several cities, pretending that she was giving them his body, in order that he might receive divine honours in a greater number of cities, and also that, if [Seth] should succeed in overpowering Horus, he might despair of ever finding the true tomb when so many were pointed out to him, all of them called the tomb of Osiris.
>
> “Of the parts of Osiris’s body the only one which Isis did not find was the male member, for the reason that this had been at once tossed into the river, and the lepidotus, the sea-bream, and the pike had fed upon it; and it is from these very fishes the Egyptians are most scrupulous in abstaining. But Isis made a replica of the member to take its place, and consecrated the phallus, in honour of which the Egyptians even at the present day celebrate a festival.”

There is a variation on the “dismemberment” story in which the role of Anubis is brought to the fore. According to that version, Anubis was mummifying the body of Osiris under the watchful gaze of Seth. Seth used his magic to learn when Anubis would leave the body to be attended by guards and then Seth took on the form of Anubis and slipped past the guards with ease. However, before Seth could get too far, Anubis caught him heading westward and he caught and castrated the trickster god then and there.[41]

There are many confusing aspects in Egyptian mythology, but the fact that Isis became pregnant with Osiris’s child before she had managed to resurrect him is surely one of the most interesting. Again, there is a lack of pre-Roman sources, but it appears, unsurprisingly, to center around the ceremonies of mummification. The account found in the Great Hymn to Osiris (Stele of Amenmose) is short, but it is the fullest of the pre-Roman sources:

> “Thy sister [Isis] acted as a protectress to thee. She drove [thy] enemies away, she averted seasons [of calamity from thee], she recited the word (or, formula) with the magical power of her

mouth, [being] skilled of tongue and never halting for a word, being perfect in command and word. Isis the magician avenged her brother. She went about seeking for him untiringly.

"She flew round and round over this earth uttering wailing cries of grief, and she did not alight on the ground until she bad found him. She made light [to come forth] from her feathers, she made air to come into being by means of her two wings, and she cried out the death cries for her brother. She made to rise up the helpless members of him whose heart was at rest, she drew from him his essence, and she made therefrom an heir. She suckled the child in solitariness and none knew where his place was, and he grew in strength. [Horus'] hand is mighty (or, victorious) within the house of Geb, and the Company of the Gods rejoice greatly at the coming of Horus, the son of Osiris, whose heart is firmly established, the triumphant one, the son of Isis, the flesh and bone of Osiris. The Tchatcha of Truth, and the Company of the Gods, and Neb-er-tcher himself, and the Lords of Truth, gather together to him, and assemble therein. Verily those who defeat iniquity rejoice in the House of Geb to bestow the divine rank and dignity upon him to whom it belongeth, and the sovereignty upon him whose it is by right."[42]

Shaw likens this account to the "opening of the mouth" ceremony, in which two Egyptian priests would stand at either side of the mummy they were attending to and touch each part of the body in order to "awaken" it for a journey into the afterlife.[43]

A depiction of the opening of the mouth ceremony

A depiction of the opening of the mouth for King Tutankhamen found in his tomb

The birth of Horus is a fascinating part of the Isis and Osiris myth. Isis not only ensures that he is born from Osiris's already-deceased body but she also tricks the sun god Re into revealing the secret and powerful names he hid from the other gods. Osiris was no passive father either, despite his death. As Plutarch relates, there was a story of Osiris embodying the departing king by passing on the knowledge he had learned to his son:

> "Later, as they relate, Osiris came to Horus from the other world and exercised and trained him for the battle. After a time Osiris asked Horus what he held to be the most noble of all things. When Horus replied, 'To avenge one's father and mother for evil done to them,' Osiris then asked him what animal he considered the most useful for them who go forth to battle; and when Horus said, 'A horse,' Osiris was surprised and raised the question why it was

that he had not rather said a lion than a horse. Horus answered that a lion was a useful thing for a man in need of assistance, but that a horse served best for cutting off the flight of an enemy and annihilating him. When Osiris heard this he was much pleased, since he felt that Horus had now an adequate preparation. It is said that, as many were continually transferring their allegiance to Horus, [Seth]'s concubine, Thueris, also came over to him; and a serpent which pursued her was cut to pieces by Horus's men, and now, in memory of this, the people throw down a rope in their midst and chop it up.

"Now the battle, as they relate, lasted many days and Horus prevailed. Isis, however, to whom [Seth] was delivered in chains, did not cause him to be put to death, but released him and let him go. Horus could not endure this with equanimity, he laid hands upon his mother and wrested the royal diadem from her head; but [Thoth] put upon her a helmet like unto the head of a cow.

"[Seth] formally accused Horus of being an illegitimate child, but with the help of [Thoth] to plead his cause it was decided by the gods that he also was legitimate. [Seth] was then overcome in two other battles."[44]

The Resurrection Of Osiris

1520a. To say: Osiris dawns, pure, mighty; high, lord of truth

1520b. on the first of the year; lord of the year.

1521a. Atum father of the gods is satisfied; Shu and Tefnut are satisfied; Geb and Nut are satisfied;

1521b. Osiris and [Isis] are satisfied; Set and [Nephthys?] are satisfied;

1522a. all the gods who are in heaven are satisfied; all the gods who are on earth and in the lands are satisfied;

1522b. all the southern and northern gods are satisfied; all the western and eastern gods are satisfied;

1522c. all the nome gods are satisfied; all the city gods are satisfied

1523a. with the great and mighty word, which comes forth from the mouth of Thoth, concerning Osiris,

1523b. the seal of life, the seal of the gods.

1523c. Anubis, the counter of hearts, deducts Osiris from the gods who belong to the earth, (and assigns him) to the gods who are in heaven,

The above text comes from the Pyramid Texts and refers to the timing of Osiris's life, with particular reference to his rebirth on the first day of the year. This is important to understanding the role Osiris continued to play in the divine "life" of the Egyptian pantheon. He was the instigator of the new cycle of time each year because he was the embodiment of fertility itself. There are few gods in any religion whose essence and physical body were as connected so profoundly with the essence of fertility as Osiris's was.

Below is a fuller account of Isis's recovery of the severed parts of her dead lover. At first, it seems to be no more than an expanded version of this scene in the myth but, with careful consideration, a verification of ritualistic importance at cult centers can be found:

> "Now Isis recovered all the pieces of the body [of Osiris] except the privates, and wishing that the burial-place of her husband should remain secret and yet be honoured by all the inhabitants of Egypt, she fulfilled her purpose in somewhat the following manner. Over each piece of the body, as the account goes, she fashioned out of spices and wax a human figure about the size of Osiris; then summoning the priests group by group, she required of all of them an oath that they would reveal to no one the trust which she was going to confide to them, and taking each group of them apart privately she said that she was consigning to them alone the burial of the body, and after reminding them of the benefactions of Osiris she exhorted them to bury his body in their own district and pay honours to him as to a god, and to consecrate to him also some one that they might choose of the animals native to their district, pay it while living the honours which they had formerly rendered to Osiris, and upon its death accord it the same kind of funeral as they had given to him.

“And since Isis wished to induce the priests to render these honours by the incentive of their own profit also, she gave them the third part of the country to defray the cost of the worship and service of the gods. And the priests, it is said, being mindful of the benefactions of Osiris and eager to please the queen who was petitioning them, and incited as well by their own profit, did everything just as Isis had suggested. It is for this reason that even to this day each group of priests supposes that Osiris lies buried in their district, pays honours to the animals which were originally consecrated to him, and, when these die, renews in the funeral rites for them the mourning for Osiris. The consecration to Osiris, however, of the sacred bulls, which are given the names Apis and Mnevis, and worship of them as gods were introduced generally among all the Egyptians, since these animals had, more than any others, rendered aid to those who discovered the fruit of the grain, in connection with both the sowing of the seed and with every agricultural labour from which mankind profits.

“Isis, they say, after the death of Osiris took a vow never to marry another man, and passed the remainder of her life reigning over the land with complete respect for the law and surpassing all sovereigns in benefactions to her subjects. And like her husband she also, when she passed from among men, received immortal honours and was buried near Memphis, where her shrine is pointed out to this day in the temple-area of Hephaestus. According to some writers, however, the bodies of these two gods rest, not in Memphis, but on the border between Egypt and Ethiopia, on the island in the Nile which lies near the city which is called Philae, but is referred to because of this burial as the Holy Field. In proof of this they point to remains which still survive on this island, both to the tomb constructed for Osiris, which is honoured in common by all the priests of Egypt, and to the three hundred and sixty libation bowls which are placed around it; for the priests appointed over these bowls fill them each day with milk, singing all the while a dirge in which they call upon the names of these gods. It is for this reason that travellers are not allowed to set foot

> on this island. And all the inhabitants of the Thebaid, which is the oldest portion of Egypt, hold it to be the strongest oath when a man swears 'by Osiris who lieth in Philae.'"[45]

The placing of Osiris's body parts throughout Egypt sounds like a fairly cynical comment for a "foreigner" like Plutarch to make, but it's likely that this was a widely held belief in ancient Egypt. Not only was the Nile representative of all bodily liquids from the corpse of Osiris, but also, during the 1st millennium BCE, the body parts buried at sacred sites were a source of great religious veneration. The so-called "tomb" of Osiris's severed left leg was to be found on the island of Bigah, and it was believed to be the source of the inundation.[46]

The notion that Osiris was literally in several places across the country and in the magical "west" was a serious aspect of his cult and in the religious aspect of agriculture in general. Ithyphallic corn mummies were created and buried during Osiris's festivals with the express purpose of magically encouraging the god to bestow his fertility on the land of his subjects.[47]

Duat

When the universe was created and Nut and Geb separated the sky from the earth and subsequently created all time, they also created the cardinal directions. This was very important to the skyward-looking ancient Egyptians, since the directions dictated the appearance and disappearance, as well as the presumed location, of their major deities. When the sun rose in the east, it represented the earliest manifestation of Re, Khepera. As it crossed the zenith of the sky, it became Re at noon and then Atmu just before it plummeted below the horizon. That each stage of the sun's "daily life" had such importance to the ancients is no surprise, and the Egyptians were no different from other cultures when they questioned where the sun went beyond the horizon in the west. The western cardinal point represented the death of the sun and therefore the death of all things, and it was there that the Duat could be found.

The Duat was not a welcoming "place of rest" kind of location. To the ancient Egyptians, the reddening of the night sky at sunset meant danger and therefore the land that lay beyond the western reaches of the world was also

fraught with dangers itself. These dangers were manifested as demons and those who were jealous of life, all of whom wanted to hinder the progress of the sun and the progress of a dead human towards any kind of eternal life that did not constitute a torturous existence.

Despite being thought of as “westward” the actual location of the Duat is more esoteric than that. Generally speaking, the Duat was not believed to exist anywhere in the world occupied by humans and deities. Shaw believes a term such as “Farworld” would be the best translation, since it does not denote that Duat existed on our plane of reality but it still suggests that it could be reached either “in person” or that messages could arrive there.[48] In fact, there are numerous accounts of the gods shouting “down” towards Osiris and the other dwellers of this “far” or “nether” region, not to mention the belief that liquids like water and blood could flow “down” to Osiris during rituals.[49] The Duat, then, has an esoteric location whose existence was nevertheless never questioned, according to ancient Egyptian religious belief.

The path of the sun throughout the night is the most iconic journey into and through the Duat. Each hour of the journey, the sun would come across an enormous door guarded by some type of ferocious beast, most commonly a snake since snakes were well-associated with the Duat. Once the sun had passed through various “lands,” Osiris gave him the regenerative power he needed in order to rise again the next day, this time in the form of a scarab beetle.

This regenerative power of Osiris is vital to understanding how the “god of the underworld” could have maintained such a position of prestige in the Egyptian pantheon. After all, it was not even beaten by his death.[50] An easy example of this regenerative power to bear in mind would be that of the seed. Beginning as a dry pod with little potential at face value, once it is placed within the black earth (like a corpse), the deadened pod is suddenly imbued with life and subsequently provides the next generation of people with life (in the form of cultivated crops and more seeds to repeat the process). Thus, Osiris, though dead, was much more than a steward of the people who have “passed on.”

It is important also to remember that the Duat, although “dangerous”, was

not like the later Abrahamic view of a “hellish” afterlife. The “demons” who resided in the Duat were there as temptations more than mere torturers. The entire process, or journey, of the afterlife revolves around the judgment in the Hall of Osiris. Anubis escorts the dead into the center of the Hall, which is lined with feathers of maat on the upper walls. Maat is the purpose of the deed’s visit to this hall of judgment. With Thoth standing at the dead person’s side, ready to transcribe the result of the judgment, the dead has to proclaim innocence to Osiris, who is sitting beneath a canopy in silence. Then the dead must go around the room to each of the 42 mummified gods who represent some sin in particular (such as falsehood or robbery) and proclaim innocence to each of their crimes. At this point, there is an almost comical act of misdirection, bordering on falsehood. The dead must once again proclaim innocence to Osiris and the other gods in the room before his or her heart leaves his body and is placed on the scale against the feather of maat. However, as terrifying as the crocodile-headed god Ammit is, whose job it was to devour the dead if they were judged to be impure, when the dead person was mummified a heart scarab was placed above the heart, which bears a spell that keeps the dead’s heart from revealing all the bad things the dead did in their lifetime. “Do not stand up as a witness” is what is inscribed on the scarab and it is there to ensure that the afterlife is guaranteed for the judged.[51]

A depiction of a judgment scene from the Book of the Dead

Once the dead has been judged to be worthy of becoming a member of the "blessed dead," he or she is declared a "follower of Osiris" and allowed to live out his or her afterlife in a variety of spectacular ways. Essentially, upon acquiring a favorable judgment from Osiris, the dead becomes physically "divine". Their body turns to Lapis Lazuli, their hair becomes obsidian-black, and their face shines like Re himself. There are options to become the sun's entourage, travelling across the sky and fending off his enemies, as well as dining with Osiris himself in his "beautiful kingdom" in the west.

There are others too, but they all generally involve the dead spending time with the deities as an equal. In fact, since they are no longer mortal, they become like the other deities in as much as they literally embody the gods depending on how they choose to spend their time. If they dine with Osiris they become Osiris, the same going for the time spent in Re"s "entourage." The dead, essentially, become divine.

Conclusion

There are some deities of ancient Egypt whose characteristics and purpose remain mysterious and confusing. Osiris, on the other hand, captivated the scribes of ancient Egypt as well as the writers of Greece and Rome, which ensured he is remembered today as a fully-formed and fascinating character of ancient mythology. Thankfully, the texts that remain, although their meanings = continue to be debated among scholars, are intact enough to relate the aspects of Osiris's story that have made people want to keep telling it generation after generation. Just as his sexual potency was incapable of diminishing even during his death, resulting in the birth of Horus, it seems that Osiris's prominence in ancient Egyptian mythology will continue to inspire readers and scholars well into the distant future. In this respect, Osiris is truly the "undying" god.

Online Resources

Other books about Egypt by Charles River Editors

Other books about ancient history by Charles River Editors

Other books about Osiris on Amazon

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